COOKING STRUGGLES IN CRETAN FOLKTALES: UNDERMINING PATRIARCHY & FORGING SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN

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1. Introduction

The paper is part of a larger research project concerning grassroots economics, i.e. theory and practice, which exist among everyday people and communities, in spaces which are more informed by everyday communal life and/or social movements than by established economic thinking. Folktales, therefore, are one among the sources I use for learning and understanding grassroots economics.

In this paper, I analyse folktales within the framework of capitalist patriarchy having in mind that the folktales draw ideas and resistance stories from social struggles and arrangements that might be non-capitalist and/or non-patriarchal at the same time. My case studies are various folktales from the island of Crete, Greece, and the main research question is how kitchen work performed by women is valued and perceived through local folktales and how the folk narratives of women’s kitchen tasks raise issues about the possibilities for fighting back patriarchal rules and enhancing solidarity among women.

The next section presents the theoretical framework of analysis and section three explains how folktales function as sources of grassroots economics. The research questions and the method of analysis are presented in section four and section five examines the main themes emerging in Cretan folktales with reference to women’s work and action in the kitchen. In section six I discuss how the themes answer or illustrate better the research questions and the concluding remarks are presented in section seven.

2. Capitalist patriarchy as the historical framework of analysis

Capitalism is not a system separate from patriarchy but a form of patriarchy itself. Patriarchy is an economic system too, because the institutions of private property, even property over human bodies, and the state/central authority are fundamental for its existence. Apart from common main institutions, capitalism shares with patriarchy the strategy of depriving its slaves/labourers of means of production. The methods of deprivation comprise expropriation of bodies and raw materials, as well as the devaluation of everything related to the reproduction of society. Therefore, patriarchy and capitalism even more, devalue nature and basic reproductive tasks from giving birth to preparing food, and from educating children and caring for the sick and elderly to performing social relations. Particularly in capitalism, the devaluation of all those tasks has reached the point of denying the value produced by work without pay; it is not coincidence that this work is mostly done by women. The devaluation of nature and reproductive work brought, apart from environmental degradation, serious problems of covering basic needs of vast parts of the population, revealing the deployment of a huge social reproduction crisis (Federici 2013; Fraser 2013; Dalla Costa & James 1975, Peterson 1997, 2010, Von Werlhof 2007).

In relation to Greek society, the above analytical tools are useful to understand the contradictions which emerged, developed and even escalated during the last 195 years. The most basic feature of capitalist patriarchy in Greece is that it had important achievements over
non-capitalist structures, but also it encountered equally prominent resistances. Especially about women, it seems that their resistances to patriarchy and capitalism have been prominent in Greece but they rarely have been understood as such (Sotiropoulou 2014).

3. Folktales as sources of grassroots economics

The paper is part of a larger project of research that I started working on since 2012 concerning economic ideas existing in everyday practices and folk cultures that are forgotten or misrepresented in the mainstream economic and/or modernist discourse. Particularly non-capitalist and “traditional” communities are thought to be unknowledgeable, “conservative, stubborn, backward-thinking” and they are considered that they never understand what capitalism is. Moreover, non-capitalist economies have been presented as more patriarchal than capitalism which is deemed to have liberated women from precapitalist/feudal suppression. Such assertions never take into account the differences among communities (some have really been very patriarchal, some have not), nor the differences among women of same communities depending on class or other identities.

To my quest concerning non-capitalist economies there contributed vastly an ongoing discussion with a good friend and colleague from Turkey, Dr Ferda Dönmez-Atbaşi (University of Ankara). Since 2010, we have been discussing how economics is being constantly produced mostly in Western European and USA institutions and how the rest of academic centres need to conform with this knowledge, which is historically and socially relevant to the societies it has been produced in. It is specific people, with specific class, gender, ethnic and educational backgrounds who create or validate economic knowledge. How gender, particularly women and women’s roles, are perceived in everyday life and in traditional settings, it has been one of our main questions. The assumption that capitalism gave women more chances than previous systems, came under constant question, as our observations started to show.

Folktales are one among the sources I use for learning and understanding grassroots economics, because the tales themselves contain vast information about the economic knowledge and experience that people and communities gather or create. They are tools or methods of the traditional educational system which runs parallel and/or in opposition to the formal networks of knowledge dissemination. Tales are therefore, strategies which are used by the story tellers to convey opinions, critique or wishes concerning value of certain occupations (Antoniou 2010, Zervou 2014, Zipes 1993, Lugones 2010). Moreover, given that folktales have many concrete incidents described in each story, class, gender and ethnicity, plus professional or educational backgrounds are clearly visible in the economic action described in a folktale.

In addition, it would be absurd to say that folktales have not been informed or affected by capitalism before and after they have started to be transcribed or recorded by collectors. Folktales, exactly because most important capitalist institutions existed before capitalism, can also be a source of what everyday people thought and did of the new articulation of economic structures into the capitalist mode (Zipes 2001: 160), particularly because people in small or rural communities had a very clear picture of the class structure of their societies (Meraklis 1984: 69-77, 1988: 23-38).

Far from my analysis is any thought of authenticity or eternal peasantry or eternal working class existence or that peasants are all the same, belonging to the same class, gender or cultural backgrounds and having all together the same class interests (Brass 2002, 2007). Neither do I share the view about the distinction between urban and rural communities,
because particularly in capitalism (or in societies like the one in Crete island) urban and rural areas are never separated. After all, the folktales were stories for both rural and urban audiences (Meraklis 1988: 5), as the tales used in this paper show.

On the other hand, my approach to use folktales from Crete island to search how women and their actions are depicted, is open to any findings or ambivalent ideas that not only defy capitalism but patriarchy as well, because it is probable that folktales integrate memories, descriptions of social structures and ideas of less patriarchal, non-patriarchal or matrifocal communities (Meraklis 1994, 1988: 33-35, Zipes 2001: 29-32). That most folktales develop around the concept of marriage and of couples entering in adventures could be a very patriarchal feature (Antoniou 2010, Meraklis 1986: 56-58). Nevertheless, Meraklis (1984: 55) observes, the social roles in several Greek communities are allocated in two different ways: apart from the male-dominated, hierarchical sharing of roles, there is also the horizontal allocation of roles among the community members, where women and men are equal and this is expressed in the magical ideology of the community (part of which is the folktale tradition).

It has already been noticed that Cretan folktales portray women to have autonomous will and behaviour to decide about themselves and they often ignore or supersede the will of their fathers or husbands, shaking the bourgeois prejudices that traditional societies are all very conservative and patriarchal (Kapsomenos & Papaderou 2014).

In terms of approach, the work done by Jack Zipes (1993, 2001, 2006) for analysing folk and fairy tales through historical materialist perspectives has been a major contribution to my effort, by giving me various ideas and multiple examples of analysis. I also use the approach by Ernest Borneman (1988) and George Thomson (1959) (although their work refers to ancient and prehistoric Greece - therefore, I could not use their work directly for my analysis) whose historical material analyses of intertwined, contradictory and inter-struggling patriarchal and matrifocal social structures are a useful guide to see folk cultures through multiple prisms instead of black-or-white assertions about how patriarchal or how matrifocal they are.

4. Research questions and method of analysis

The paper aims to answer three main research questions:

First, I tried to explore how women in Cretan folktales are related to kitchen or cooking tasks and how their activity in the kitchen or with respect to food preparation affects their position and possibilities within economy and society.

Second, the folktales show whether and how women struggle against patriarchy as a social-economic system. The question refers also to the specific actions and discourses that women might express towards or against men as representatives of patriarchal power.

The third research question of this study is how women struggle among each other. Patriarchy as a suppressive and exploitative structure creates hierarchical differences among women themselves, with class difference being the most evident in the folktales.

To answer the questions, I followed the following analysis method:

I tried to find as many as possible folktales from Crete island, as published by local collectors and researchers, whether they are academic authors or not. I identified several common themes or important patterns of women’s activities, whether the tale has women protagonists or keeps women at secondary/assisting roles. For referencing easier the folktales, I enumerated the tales I use and their full list is in Annex of this paper.

One major issue I had to deal with, has been what I should do with the negative or anti-social behaviours undertaken by women in the folktales. It is still an open discussion in
feminist theory whether the negative depiction of women in folk cultures is a patriarchal discourse which we should not reproduce uncritically; or whether it is a realistic description of the political struggle of women who sometimes have to face the fact that gender (or sex) identity is not enough a reason for someone to position herself at the side of the suppressed instead of the side of suppressors. I decided to keep the negative aspects of (some) women’s behaviour in the folktales within my analysis scope.

Nevertheless, the paper has also several limitations that could not be addressed at this stage and I hope that I will be able to tackle them in the future. The main limitation is the set of methodological and theoretical voids because this approach is still a work in progress. Moreover, there is no systematic information about story-tellers in the collections I have used for this paper, although some give the names or short bios of the story-tellers and they seem to be mostly women (Doundoulaki-Ustamanolaki 1982, 1986, 2001, Mavredaki 2006: 172-174, Chourdakis 1998, 1999). Finally, due to time and financial constraints there was no possibility till now to conduct field research on this topic.

5. Themes concerning women’s kitchen work in Cretan folktales

5.1. Theme A: The value of women’s kitchenwork

Women’s work is highly valued in Cretan folktales and the work done within the kitchen or for the preparation of food is assigned high importance in both material and symbolic terms. Some folktales deal directly with the value of women’s work in the kitchen like “The man who wanted to do women’s work” (T1) who, while trying to show that kitchen work is simple and easy, ends up burning the food and damaging his house. There are also various versions concerning the story of the old man and old woman who share their common property/wealth and how the woman managed to survive better with her food creation and management skills, (T2, T3, T4, T5).

Women’s cooking or pastry skills can create an entire human, like in the story of “Musk/Moschos” (T6), and on the other hand, men in the folktales also know how to cook and they indeed cook in various occasions, either for themselves and other people, or as professional cooks (T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T13, T14, T15). Moreover, not all women know how to cook, or how to cook well, which means that folktales depict cooking and kitchen work neither as natural nor as inherent in women’s role.

When kitchen work is disdained, by a man or a woman, the woman who does the work inflicts punishment or educational rites or tests on the person who insults her. The simplest test is that the man undertakes the kitchen tasks (T1) or learns by experience that a love “like salt” is the most precious (T16, T17). However, the most notorious test is the one imposed by the woman, usually of old age and poor in terms of economic status, whose pan is broken by a irreverent young woman or man, who is then cursed by the woman to fall in deep love with a hard-to-find mate (T18, T19, T20). The connection between respect to women’s food-preparation labour and facilitation of love affairs is stunning.

Another type of punishment and reward is the example of the baker woman who is left by the dragoness/monster woman to bake the bread loafs without necessary tools. The female protagonist gives fabric to the baker woman to perform her tasks without danger and when the dragoness chases the protagonist woman, the baker woman denies to stop the latter (T21, T22, T23, T13).
5.2. Theme B: Cooking as a means of (re)production

In practical terms, cooking skills are those who permit a poor household to survive even with limited means, which show that cooking abilities are indispensable for the disadvantaged people to survive [(T24, T25, T26, T27, T28, T29, T30)]. Particularly about women, cooking becomes one of their most important skills escorting their wit, persistence, determination and personal integrity. When a woman is in hardship or far from home, her kitchen work supports her survival till conditions change again [(T22, T4, T31)].

Women’s kitchen skills are also a way to escape persecution or to hide their identity in general by becoming a cook or kitchen helper in a wealthy household. The folktales are very clear about the class and gender biases, showing how people cannot recognise who the cook or kitchen helper can be and they finally become educated or punished exactly because they ignore the woman who cooks in the kitchen [(T32, T33, T34, T35, T20)].

Maltreatment of women is also punished or retaliated by the use of or by the anthropomorphism of her kitchenware. An example is the speaking kitchenware in the kitchen of the expelled woman who hosts her ex-husband or father without him recognising her. The kitchenware speaks and makes sure that the ex-husband or father is educated [(T36, T37)].

5.3. Theme C: Cooking as a political skill

In some tales, cooking is the test or one of the tests for a woman to ascend socially or/and secure her position as a princess or queen [(T32, T38, T16)]. The only skill that can supersede cooking is giving birth to (extraordinary) children [(T39, T40, T41, T42, T43, T44)].

It is quite weird to see the creation of food as linked to political power, because we are accustomed to think of domestic labour and particularly food production as simple reproduction tasks, unable to improve the political position of the people who perform them..

Folktales seem to be able to grasp the nuances of the food production as political skill instead of categorising it in “low politics”. One would also comment that food production skills have been highly political not only in pre-capitalist eras but probably in pre-patriarchal or non-patriarchal societies too. Future research could explore the rather risky hypothesis whether non-patriarchal memories exist in the folktales where cooking by women creates for them a direct right to the throne (!) irrespective of kin or marriage to a royal person [(T45)].

However, story tellers are even more apt to understand politics not only vertically but also horizontally. An example is the encryption of messages (!) by hiding symbolic items within food, or baked breads or sweets, by the use of which women make sure that their message will reach the important person without anyone intercepting the message [(T46, T47, T34, T20, T48)].

5.4. Theme D: Cooking as materialising antagonisms among women

In all folktales, class differences are very clear. They become even more obvious through kitchen labour and through the materials each household possess. Moreover, rich households have many workers and servants, even if the lady of the household is also involved (sometimes) in the kitchen [(T18, T34, T9, T10, T49, T20)].

Concerning class conflict, there is a very common pattern in Cretan folktales: a rich woman hires a poor woman to work for her and she leaves her unpaid and/or under unbearable working conditions [(T26, T27, T28, T29, T30)]. The class conflict is never
resolved directly among the two women, but it is transferred to their daughters or husbands or to third parties, but the starting point is always this set of bad working conditions.

Another pattern is the rich woman who attempts to poison the meal of the poor woman or of the poor woman’s children who ascended socially. The poisoning is avoided by miraculous or not so miraculous means and the evil rich woman is punished. (T39, T40, T41).

Apart from food as a death instrument, cooking or kitchen work can be a way for a woman to trick another woman. A witch shares kitchen fire and meal to learn information and inflict witchcraft (T33), a rich woman cooks very salty food for the poor girl in order to make her thirsty and take her eyes for a bit of water (T50), or an old woman assists the king to catch a young woman, pretending that she does not know how to cook (T51, T52).

Of course, there are many issues to be examined at this point. First, the antagonism among women is depicted in the folktales in various ways. Some of them are very annoying in the sense that if the best cook is rewarded, aren’t all women forced to cook and compete with each other? Second, aren’t the Cretan folktales reproducing patriarchy’s aim to create mistrust among women? Should we celebrate the folktales as class conflict stories only and not problematise that it is women who struggle among each other?

I admit that the most annoying detail in such stories is how the severe punishment of evil women acquits men who in the meantime have abused the good women, of their own responsibilities. The folktale has usually a happy ending with the basic protagonist couple reuniting often after the man’s bad behaviour. Such conciliation, though, does not happen in tales without-kings-and-princesses, like the one of the old woman who allies with the wild goats and decides never to conciliate with her abusive husband (T4, T5).

However, it is not shocking that there are evil women in folktales. Patriarchy is a social, economic and political system where people have social statuses and powers and they are also given some margins of action. A woman can be reproducing patriarchy because she has to (f.ex. a poor woman ascends socially through marriage with a lord) or because she really likes to (f.ex. a rich woman does not pay enough a poor female worker). One would recognise that in terms of pragmatist analysis, the folktales are really taking into account not only the social differences among women but also the differences emerging through a multi-level framework where social conditions and personal decisions are intertwined.

The antagonisms among women of the same class or even same family are also striking in the tales. One would ask the question whether this depiction is detrimental for women’s solidarity or whether it is huge service to antipatriarchal struggles, by showing that “sameness” of women is not enough, if it is not accompanied by actions which practically support other women. Antagonisms among men (even in the same family) are also explicitly depicted in the folktales (T53, T54, T55, T56). Solidarity for women can come from women (or even by men) outside their family and class – which shows, depending on the story, that women need to be open-minded on who their “kin” and struggle mates can be in order to achieve their goals.

5.5. Theme E: The dark side of the kitchen

The most difficult pattern I had to deal with while I was preparing this paper has been the folktales where women cook and eat human flesh. I excluded from my analysis the dragon and dragonness’ cannibalistic behaviours because by definition those are not humans (Moraiti 2007). Neither did I want to dismiss anthropophagy under the generalisation that this is a very ancient and common pattern in myths linked to the use of fire or cooking in human societies (Levi-Strauss 1964: 89-202, 324-347).
First, in all the tales where women eat human flesh, those same women are in imminent danger of death. They are either facing extreme poverty or they are going to die murdered by men of their own family, because of a love affair.

Second, the evolution of the stories can be categorised into two types of results for the women who cannibalise. One type of tale shows that those who do not participate in eating human flesh, are rewarded. This is the type of Cinderella tale, which in Greece and other neighbouring countries has usually cannibalistic aspects against the mother of three daughters and the daughter who does not participate in the murder and meal is rewarded (T57, T58, T59). It must not be a coincidence that the human flesh that should not be eaten is a woman’s flesh – probably a symbolic warning against women socially “eating each other” to survive.

Another type of tale, is the one of the unmarried elite woman who ends up pregnant and has to hide the baby from her father. She and her servant arrange to kill, cook and eat the baby. When the princess gets married she is afraid that her servant will give her in, so she tries to have her servant executed. This type of tale has two versions concerning its ending: the servant sings a codified song describing how faithful she has been to her lady, and either the lady changes her mind and the secret continues hidden for ever (T60); or the lady insists for her servant to be executed and the husband learns the truth, punishes his wife and gets married to the faithful servant because she was virgin at her wedding night (T61). The hint is that the women who keep the secret are rewarded – plus the moral that patriarchy does not really care about women’s humanity or integrity, provided that they remain virgin till their wedding night [one could say that these folktales reveal everything we need to know about patriarchy].

The important aspect in this type of folktales is the impossibility of rules imposed over women and the question whether women would have also avoided being so ruthless if patriarchy was not so ruthless against them, in terms of economic survival or in terms of gender roles and gender requirements. The impossibility of the rules is also underlined by the lack of direct retribution or punishment in many of the cases of anthropophagy. The princess who, together with her servant, kills and eats her baby is punished for not being virgin and not for the crime she did, as the non-punishment of her accomplice shows.

The construction of multiple “Others” in this type of folktales is indicative of how Cretan communities might have understood the pressures on women emerging from patriarchy and its economic aspect, poverty. The story tellers, audience or readers of the tales face dilemmas of identifications with the protagonists without this identification being clearcut or even possible in most cases (Zemon Davis 2000). Finally, we usually consider the awe and fear emerging from these anthropophagic stories as a negative depiction against women by patriarchy, but what if this works also the other direction? What if women themselves create the dark folktales for their own purposes?

6. Back to the research questions: What Cretan folktales teach us about women’s work in the kitchen?

6.1. How are women related to kitchen or cooking tasks?

The first pattern that is more than obvious in the Cretan folktales is, as already mentioned, the high value attributed to kitchen or cooking tasks. Women are themselves considered hardworking, apt and talented. The storylines of the tales call for respect for women and their labour. The second pattern is that through their activity in the kitchen
women prove witty, knowledgeable of tricks and very able to achieve the aims of their own agenda. It is better to be in alliance with them.

This leads us to the third pattern which is that women are cunning and scheming, for good or for bad. It is then, preferable not to become their enemy. This pattern is directly associated with the pattern that women are dangerous, particularly because they have access to kitchen spaces and cooking skills, and it could be better not to push them to the extremes.

6.2. How do women struggle against men and/or patriarchy?

First, women are portrayed as very capable in achieving their goals through their hard work and persistence. The pattern is so common that it could be considered a main structure axis of Cretan folktales: when women are protagonists, they are also persistent, hardworking and achieve their goals. Women create alliances, among themselves or with other character-helpers, through cooking. Cooking is also used by women to prove their skills, smartness and wisdom, or to show their ruthlessness, like the woman who tried to poison her husband (T62). Women are constructing analogies or the folktale stories are based on analogies favouring women: the kitchen (when) is women’s kingdom, is also a space where important know-how is acquired and this is valid outside kitchen too.

A fourth pattern related to women’s resistance to patriarchy is that they keep their secrets in the kitchen and through kitchen labour. The tale of “Fesi-Bantesinis” (T32) where the destitute princess protagonist works in the kitchen of the princess-sister of the prince that the protagonist loves and they together scheme how to educate him not to be arrogant is very illustrative in that sense. The same space and type of work are also their means to encrypt messages to be revealed to the intended recipient only.

The most interesting pattern though is the one which depicts the kitchen as a weapon warehouse or conspiracy headquarters of women against patriarchy. We usually learn in capitalist patriarchy that the kitchen space and cooking tasks are signs of submission and repression of women – and this can also be true. Nevertheless, submission and repression in the kitchen seems to be one side of the coin only, because the domestic space and/or the food production realms can be also sites of resistance (Hooks 1990: 41-49). The folktales of Crete show that women not only understand the power of having (production) spaces and materials of their own in order to resist patriarchy but also that this is important to be publicly announced by story-tellers, perhaps as a warning or a call for struggle.

6.3. How do women struggle among themselves?

The main pattern concerning the struggles of women among themselves is that kitchen labour is directly affected by and directly affects class and other social differences. The differences and conflicts are enhanced or reduced through the kitchen labour of women. Kitchen labour in the folktales of Crete is presented as a way of creating conscience of social and class difference. The kitchen is also a very important survival space for women when they are in conflict with other women. At the same time, the kitchen is a space where a woman can find solidarity from unknown women or women outside her kin. The other aspect of the kitchen is that it can become a weapon warehouse against other women, for good or for bad.

Finally, the kitchen is pictured as the place where promises are made to each other among women and where solidarity among them can be forged or broken. However, the most striking warning to women who do not show solidarity to another woman is that their
punishment for supporting patriarchy is that the individualistic/patriarchal choice ends up favouring the initially maltreated woman. In other words, if solidarity among women is broken, Cretan tales tell us, it is not sure at all that the first to break it will be the one reaping the benefits of breaking women’s solidarity.

7. Concluding remarks

Political correctness is not a mere concern of the Cretan folk story teller because this would obscure the real social conflicts that exist, whether we like it or not. I wanted to show exactly this approach of everyday people and how they clearly understand and disseminate political economic aspects of gendered divisions and actions.

Therefore, this attempt of analysing Cretan folktales as sources of gendered political economy shows that cooking, food production and kitchen labour is considered a very important skill and type of work/labour and the tales advise that this labour should be well rewarded and respected. This is definitely not capitalist valuation but can be patriarchal valuation, as in many types of patriarchy this work has not been low valued.

Moreover, women resist patriarchal injustices and suppression, whether it is exercised by men or by women, through their own food production and cooking skills. The folktales of Crete directly show that neither resisting patriarchy can be done in terms of gender only, nor resisting class structures can be done without taking into account gender aspects of class hierarchy, thus they enable the doing of resistance through the use of community narratives (Lugones 2010).

Nevertheless, more research is needed towards the direction of using folktales as sources of grassroots economics, particularly as sources of gender/antipatriarchal grassroots economics. I also hope that in the future both the methods and the findings will be improved, refined or revisited not only by the author but also by other scholars.

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Annex: List of tales in the order they appear in the paper
T2: “The old man, the old woman and the nut tree”, Doundoulaki 1986: 13-14
T4: “The old man, the old woman, and the wild goats”, Mavredaki 2006: 123-129
T5: “The old man, the old woman and the little wild goats”, Chourdakis 1998: 43-51
T6: “Musk/Moschos”, Pitharouliou 2003: 204-208
T8: “Mr True/Alithinos”, Doundoulaki-Ustamanolaki 1982: 160-165
T14: “The old man with the three daughters”, Chourdakis 1998: 60-74
T20: “Tzini Matzini Prince”, Azer 2014
T27: “The rich woman, the poor woman and the 12 months”, Doundoulaki-Ustamanolaki 1982: 166-170
T29: “The rich woman, the poor woman and the 40 dragons”, Chourdakis 1999: 182 – 189
T36: “The woman with the cut hands/Koutsohera”, Chourdakis 1999: 22-28
T37: “Kassidaki/The bald child”, Doundoulaki 1986: 45
T38: “I love you like salt”, Mavredaki 2006: 163-166


